

Message Text

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ACTION EB-07

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FM AMCONSUL ASMARA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3721

INFO AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON

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COMIDEASTFOR

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NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 ASMARA 1005

E.O. 11652: GDS

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SUBJECT: AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION IN ERITREA

REF: A. ASMARA 748 (DTG 030845Z SEP 75); B. ASMARA 971 DTG
171205Z SEP 75); C. ASMARA 823 (DTG 270700Z SEP 75); D. ASMARA
940 (DTG 120900Z NOV 75)

1. SUMMARY: ANALYSIS OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION
IN ERITREA OFFERS CLEAR INDICATION OF IMMENSE IMPACT INSURGENCY
HAS HAD IN ALTERING PATTERN AND DIMINISHING SIZE OF PRODUCTION,
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AND DISRUPTING DISTRIBUTION THROUGH TRANSPORTATION DIFFICULTIES.

SUCH ANALYSIS IS SEVERELY HAMPERED BY LACK OF STATISTICS, AND INNACCURACIES IN THOSE AVAILABLE. NONETHELESS, WE KNOW THAT DESPITE RECORD RAINFALL, HARVEST HAS DECREASED FROM LAST YEAR'S LEVELS, ALTHOUGH THREATENED EPMG DESTRUCTION OF CROPS BEFORE HARVEST NEVER MATERIALIZED. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN SHIFT TO SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE AS SURVIVAL MECHANISM AGAINST ADVERSE SITUATION. IN SPHERE OF COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE, INSURGENCY HAS DEALT PRODUCTION ALMOST FATAL BLOW, AND HAS STALEMATED THOSE FEW ACTIVITIES WHICH DID MANAGE TO CONTINUE PRODUCTION. DISTRIBUTION IS MOST UNCERTAIN ELEMENT IN AGRICULTURAL PICTURE, AS TRANSPORTATION LINKS, THOUGH PRESENTLY INTACT, REMAIN FRAGILE. IN RECENT WEEKS EPMG AUTHORITIES HAVE FOCUSED RENEWED ATTENTION ON ECONOMIC SECTOR AND, ALTHOUGH OFTEN NAIVE, HAVE DISPLAYED SOME INCLINATION TOWARD MODERATION TO RELIEVE CONTINUING SHORTAGES. IF INSURGENCY CONTINUES AT CURRENT LEVEL OR INTENSIFIES, AGRICULTURAL SITUATION WILL CONTINUE TO DETERIORATE, AND NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES WILL RESULT. FOOD CRISIS WOULD ENSUE ONLY IF EPMG OR FRONT MAKE CONCERTED EFFORT TO MAKE FOOD A TARGET IN CURRENT CONFLICT. IF, HOWEVER, EPMG IS SINCERE AND DETERMINED TO MINIMIZE IMPACT DETERIORATING SITUATION, AND IS PREPARED TO COMMIT NECESSARY RESOURCES, SUCH CRISIS COULD BE AVERTED. END SUMMARY

2. 1975 HARVEST: ACCURATE STATISTICS ON TOTAL 1975 HARVEST IN ERITREA WILL PROBABLY NEVER BE COMPILED, THEREFORE CONGEN IS DEPENDENT ON SERIES OF GUESSTIMATES FROM VARIETY OF SOURCES. EVEN AVAILABLE STATISTICS ON 1974 HARVEST (7/74 - 7/75) REFLECT INABILITY OF AGRICULTURAL AUTHORITIES TO OBTAIN ACCURATE FIGURES, THEREFORE SHOWING ONLY SLIGHT DECLINES FROM PRECEDING YEAR. NONETHELESS, DESPITE RECORD RAINFALL IN ALL AGRICULTURAL AREAS, WE KNOW THAT CEREAL AND PULSE PRODUCTION HAS DECREASED BECAUSE OF DISLOCATION OF FARMERS AS RESULT OF FIGHTING; WHILE COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION HAS BEEN DEVASTATED BY SEVERE DISRUPTION OF TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS AND FINANCING UNCERTAINTIES. THERE IS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN SHIFT BY MANY FARMERS FROM COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION OF COTTON AND OILSEEDS TO SUBSISTENCE CEREALS, BUT MAGNITUDE OF SHIFT CANNOT BE ASSESSED. HARVEST IN THREE HIGHLAND DISTRICTS WAS COMPLETED BY EARLY NOVEMBER; IN WESTERN LOWLANDS IT WILL FINISH BY END OF DECEMBER; AND ON EASTERN ESCARPMENT BY APRIL. ESTIMATES OF DECLINE IN SUBSISTENCE CEREAL AND PULSE PRODUCTION RANGE FROM 25 TO 35 PERCENT, WHILE ESTIMATES IN DECLINE OF

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COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION OF CEREALS, PULSES, OILSEEDS, FRUITS AND VEGETABLES RANGE FROM 50 TO ALMOST 100 PERCENT. ONE ELEMENT WHICH WAS NOT SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN DECLINE IN PRODUCTION WAS MUCH-RUMORED EPMG CAMPAIGN TO DESTROY FOOD CROPS BEFORE THEY COULD BE HARVESTED. EVEN MOST PARTISAN SUPPORTERS OF INSURGENTS DO NOT MAKE THIS CHARGE. CERTAIN EPMG COUNTERINSURGENCY MEASURES HAVE, HOWEVER, HAD IMPORTANT EFFECT ON PATTERNS OF PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION. THESE INCLUDE SLAUGHTER OF ERITREANS' LIVESTOCK

IN AREAS BEYOND EPMG CONTROL, DESTRUCTION OF SMALL GRAIN MILLS
IN NUMBER OF VILLAGES, AND HARASSMENT OF SMALL-SCALE AGRICULT-
URAL MIDDLEMEN WHO SEEK TO SELL OR BARTER THEIR PRODUCE IN TOWNS.

3. COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE: INSURGENT ACTIVITIES AND COLLATERAL
UNCERTAINTIES IN TRANSPORTATION AND FINANCE HAVE CRIPPLED COMM-
ERCIAL AND EXPORT AGRICULTURAL
PRODUCTION IN ERITREA, AND HAS
HAD AN ADVERSE IMPACT ON PRODUCTION IN NEIGHBORING PROVINCES
WHICH DEPEND ON ERITREA FOR PROCESSING AND EXPORT SERVICES.
VEGETABLE AND FRUIT PRODUCTION ON LARGE ESTATES NEAR KEREN AND
GHINDA HAS BEEN REDUCED TO FRACTION OF FORMER LEVEL, AND EXPORT
OF THESE COMMODITIES HAS VIRTUALLY CEASED. BANANA PRODUCTION
AROUND AGORDAT, WHICH LAST YEAR YIELDED SOME 19,000 TONS, IS NOW
NEGLECTIBLE. ACCORDING TO REPORT IN EARLY NOVEMBER PUBLISHED BY
ETHIOPIAN GRAIN BOARD, COTTON PRODUCTION IN TESSENNY AREA, WHERE
OVER 80 PERCENT OF ERITREAN COTTON IS GROWN, WAS ONLY 3500 TONS,
WITH AN ADDITIONAL 3500 TONS FROM LAST YEAR'S CROP STILL IN
STORAGE. LAST YEAR ERITREA PRODUCED OVER 16,000 TONS OF COTTON.
SAME REPORT FOCUSES ON PRODUCTION OF SESAME SEED AND SORGHUM IN
HUMERA, WHICH, ALTHOUGH LOCATED IN BEGEMDIR, NORMALLY MARKETS
THROUGH ASMARA. SESAME SEED PRODUCTION IN HUMERA, WHICH ACCOUNTS
FOR 75 PERCENT OF ETHIOPIAN PRODUCTION OF THIS SECOND-LARGEST
EXPORT EARNER, IS DOWN 65 PERCENT, TO 30,000 TONS. REPORT NOTES
CANDIDLY THAT IN ADDITION TO DISRUPTION OF TRANSPORTATION CAUSED
BY HEIGHTENED INSURGENT ACTIVITIES, PRODUCTION WAS ALSO HAMPERED
BY INTRODUCTION OF GAS RATIONING AND RELUCTANCE OF ASMARA EXPORT-
ERS TO PROVIDE USUAL ADVANCE PAYMENT FOR HARVESTING. IT HAS BEEN
LEARNED THAT COMMITTEE FROM ETHIOPIAN COFFEE BOARD VISITED HUMERA
AND AFTER CALCULATING COST OF SHIPPING SESAME CROP OUT FOR EXPORT
VIA GONDAR-ADDIS-DJIBOUTI, OFFERED PRODUCERS ETH \$65 PER QUINTAL.
PRODUCERS RESPONDED THAT PRODUCTION COSTS WERE ETH \$115 PER
QUINTAL, AND SAID THEY WOULD AWAIT RISE IN WORLD PRICE. SORGHUM
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PRODUCTION HUMERA, WHICH TRADITIONALLY SUPPLEMENTED ERITREAN
FOOD SUPPLIES, IS REPORTED TO HAVE SUFFERED SIMILAR DECLINES.

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4. DISTRIBUTION: TRANSPORTATION OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IS MOST VITAL ELEMENT IN CURRENT AGRICULTURAL SITUATION. DESPITE VULNERABILITY TO INSURGENT ATTACK, ALL PRIMARY ROADS IN ERITREA ARE CURRENTLY INTACT. MASSAWA-ASMARA RAILROAD RESUMED OPERATION IN EARLY OCTOBER AFTER TWO-MONTH SUSPENSION OF SERVICE AS RESULT DAMAGE TO BRIDGE BY INSURGENTS. TONNAGE FOR MOST RECENT 30-DAY PERIOD (OCT-NOV 1975) WAS 4500 TONS COMPARED TO 8800 FOR SAME PERIOD LAST YEAR, AND AVERAGE OF 14,000 TONS PER MONTH IN 1973-74. ASMARA-MASSAWA ROAD AND RAILROAD HAVE NOT BEEN ATTACKED OR INTERDICTED SINCE SEPTEMBER. ASMARA-KEREN-AGORDAT-TESENENY ROAD IS SUBJECT TO FREQUENT ATTACKS, ESPECIALLY
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BETWEEN KEREN AND ASMARA; FOR EXAMPLE, RECENT CONVOY FROM TESENENY TO ASMARA TOOK SIX WEEKS TO COMPLETE JOURNEY. ASMARA-ADI UGRI ROAD, PRINCIPAL LINK TO SOUTH, IS SUBJECT TO OCCASIONAL ATTACK, BUT IS CONSIDERED MORE SECURE THAN NOW-DISUSED DECAMERE-ADI CAIEH ROAD. TRANSPORTATION IS FURTHER HAMPERED BY TIME REQUIRED TO ASSEMBLE LARGE CONVOYS (USUALLY BETWEEN 300-400 TRUCKS) AND TO ASSIGN MILITARY ESCORT. REPORTEDLY NO INSURANCE

COMPANIES WILL INSURE COMMERCIAL VEHICLES TRAVELING IN ERITREA, AND FREIGHT RATES ARE INCREASED ACCORDINGLY. TRUCKING COMPANIES OFTEN REQUIRE THAT SHIPPERS HIRE ENTIRE CAPACITY OF TRUCK EVEN IF CONSIGNMENT WOULD BE ONLY PARTIAL LOAD. AT PRESENT CONVOYS COMING FROM BEGEMDIR AND TIGRE CARRYING FOOD FOR URBAN POPULATIONS IN ASMARA AND MASSAWA ARE GENERALLY UNHINDERED BY INSURGENTS. FLOW OF FOOD FROM RURAL AREAS OF ERITREA TO ASMARA, HOWEVER, IS HARSHLY DISCOURAGED BY REBELS, THUS CREATING FREQUENT SHORTAGES OF DAIRY AND POULTRY PRODUCTS, CERTAIN VEGETABLES, AND FRUITS. EPMG EFFORTS TO ENCOURAGE PRIVATE TRUCK OWNERS TO OVERCOME THESE SHORTAGES BY EASING TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS ON NOVEMBER 11 HAVE HAD NO IMPACT ON SITUATION, BECAUSE INSURGENTS HAVE REPORTEDLY WARNED TRUCKERS THAT THEY WILL NOT PERMIT ERITREAN-PRODUCED FOOD INTO TOWNS GARRISONED BY EPMG FORCES. LIKEWISE, EPMG WILL NOT PERMIT CERTAIN PRODUCTS WHICH ARE EITHER PROCESSED IN ASMARA OR IMPORTED FROM THE SOUTH SUCH AS CEREALS, SALT, AND EDIBLE OIL, TO BE DISTRIBUTED TO RURAL AREAS. EFFECT OF THIS ALMOST TOTAL STANDOFF IS WIDESPREAD CHANGE IN DIETARY HABITS WHICH MAY RESULT IN MALNUTRITION.

5. EPMG CONCERN: IN EARLY NOVEMBER BG GETACHEW NADEW, MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR, EXHIBITED FIRST SERIOUS EPMG CONCERN IN CONTINUING DISINTEGRATION OF ERITREAN ECONOMY. FIRST WEEK IN NOVEMBER HE CONVOKED LEADERS IN INDUSTRIAL SECTOR TO ASSURE THEM THAT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS WOULD IMPROVE AND THAT THEY SHOULD MAINTAIN PRODUCTION AND EMPLOYMENT LEVELS AND BORROW MORE MONEY FOR INVESTMENT. THIS EXERCISE, WHICH WAS WIDELY RIDICULED IN PRIVATE, WAS FOLLOWED IN LATE NOVEMBER BY MEETING OF AGRICULTURAL OPERATORS AND FOREIGN INVESTORS. WEEK OF DEC. 15, SEMINAR WAS HELD AT MUNICIPALITY FOCUSING ON DEVELOPMENT OF LIGHT INDUSTRY. GIST OF THIS EFFORT BY GETACHEW IS TO CONVINCE LEADERS IN ECONOMIC SECTOR THAT CONDITIONS WILL IMPROVE IF ONLY GREATER EFFORT IS MADE BY ALL SECTORS OF ECONOMY. WHILE THIS FORM OF

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EPMG CONCERN ABOUT THE ERITREAN ECONOMY, I.E., ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT BY DICTATE OF ALL-POWERFUL MARTIAL LAW ADMINISTRATOR, IS UNLIKELY TO HAVE ANY TANGIBLE RESULT, THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT EPMG MILITARY AUTHORITIES NOW RECOGNIZE THAT UNLESS THEY MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT LEVELS AND AT LEAST MARGINAL SUPPLIES OF FOOD, THEY WILL FACE EXTENSIVE OUT-MIGRATION FROM TOWNS AND CITIES, THUS PROVIDING RESERVOIR OF DISCONTENTS FROM WHICH INSURGENTS CAN DRAW. IN EFFORT TO PREEMPT THIS EVENTUALITY, EPMG AUTHORITIES ARE NOW PERMITTING LIMITED DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF FOOD TO NEEDIEST MEMBERS OF URBAN POPULATION. CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICE HAS, FROM NOV. 10 TO DATE, PROVIDED ALMOST 20,000 MONTHLY RATIONS OF CEREALS, SORGHUM AND OIL TO PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN IN POOREST AREAS OF ASMARA. BY END OF YEAR THEY ANTICIPATE TOTAL TO EXCEED 45,000 RATIONS DISTRIBUTED THROUGH NINE CENTERS IN ASMARA AND THREE

IN MASSAWA. THOUGH CRS REALIZES THAT THIS PROGRAM WILL PROBABLY NOT BE PERMITTED TO EXPAND INTO RURAL AREAS, TO DATE THEY HAVE ENJOYED ENTHUSIASTIC COOPERATION OF EPMG OFFICIALS. ON NOVEMBER 23, RELIGIOUS RELIEF SERVICES WAS GRANTED PERMISSION TO BEGIN ONCE WEEKLY DISTRIBUTION OF RELIEF GRAINS (MAXIMUM SIX KILOS PER PERSON) IN IMPOVERISHED ACRIA DISTRICT OF ASMARA. THOUGH THIS EFFORT HAS BEEN TEMPORARILY HALTED BECAUSE OF INTERNAL POLITICAL CONFLICT, ONCE DISTRIBUTION PROBLEMS HAVE BEEN RESOLVED THEY EXPECT TO GRADUALLY EXPAND PROGRAM SUCH COMPROMISES WITH LOCAL REALITIES, THOUGH MARGINAL, ARE INDICATION OF WILLINGNESS OF EPMG TO UNDERTAKE MEASURES WHICH THREE MONTHS AGO WOULD HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED SUBVERSIVE TO INTERESTS OF "SECURITY."

6. PROGNOSIS: ALTHOUGH AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION HAS SUFFERED STAGGERING SETBACKS BECAUSE OF INSURGENCY, FOOD SITUATION IS SETTLING INTO STABLE, IF NOT ENTIRELY ACCEPTABLE, EQUILIBRIUM DOMINATED BY STANDOFF BETWEEN CONFLICTING SIDES. IF RURAL POL-
ULATION IS NOT SUDDENLY INUNDATED BY ERITREANS FLEEING SEVERE URBAN SHORTAGES, FOOD SUPPLY IN COUNTRYSIDE IS THOUGHT TO BE MARGINALLY ADEQUATE. ALTHOUGH POSSIBLY DEFICIENT IN NORMAL NUTRITION, CURRENT FOOD SUPPLIES ARE CONSIDERED SUFFICIENT TO SUSTAIN THE POPULATION AND EVEN ROVING BANDS OF INSURGENTS. FOOD STORED IN RURAL AREAS HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN SECRETED IN UNDERGROUND CACHES WHICH WOULD REQUIRE EPMG FORCES MAXIMAL EFFORT TO CONFISCATE OR DESTROY. SUCH STORAGE, HOWEVER, IS HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO INFESTATION BY RODENTS AND INSECTS. FOR THE URBAN POPULATIONS OF ASMARA AND MASSAWA, AND TO A LESSER DEGREE
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KEREN AND DECAMERE AND OTHER TOWNS, FOOD SITUATION IS DEPEND-
ENT ON CONTINUANCE OF APPARENT TACIT AGREEMENT BETWEEN EPMG AND INSURGENTS THAT GRAIN IMPORTED FROM OTHER PROVINCES MAY ENTER ERITREA UNHINDERED AS LONG AS IT FEEDS URBAN ERITREANS AS WELL AS ETHIOPIAN GARRISON. IF, HOWEVER, EITHER SIDE SHOULD DECIDE THAT THIS ARRANGEMENT IS NO LONGER VIABLE, THESE URBAN POPULATIONS WOULD BE PLUNGED INTO SITUATION OF CRITICAL SHORTAGES AND RUNAWAY PRICES, LLARGELY BECAUSE FOOD RESERVES ARE MINIMAL AND COULD NOT BE EXPECTED TO SUSTAIN POPULATION FOR MUCH MORE THAN FEW MONTHS. THUS FOOD SITUATION, THOUGH CURRENTLY OPERATIVE, REMAINS FRAGILE, CONVERSELY, COMMERCIAL AGRICULTRUAL PRODUCTION HAS SUFFERED SO PROFOUNDLY THAT IT WILL REQUIRE MANY YEARS AFTER PEACE IS RESTORED TO BRING PRODUCTION BACK TO LEVEL EVEN APPROACH-
ING FORMER PROSPERITY.
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